Philosophy 301: After the Fall — Guilt, Faith, and Defiance in Existential Thought

Course Introduction

"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."
— Jean-Paul Sartre

What happens to the human psyche when the traditional foundations of truth, morality, and divine order begin to crumble?

This course traces the seismic shift in Western thought that occurred when humanity was suddenly forced to confront its own radical freedom. We begin in the 19th century with Fyodor Dostoevsky, who accurately predicted the psychological torment and moral chaos of a world stripped of spiritual certainty. From

there, we explore the pivotal crossroads of the late 19th century: Søren Kierkegaard's insistence that we must take a blind, passionate leap into faith to survive this anxiety, contrasted against Friedrich Nietzsche's triumphant declaration of the "death of God" and his call for humanity to forge its own values.

Finally, we trace how these ideas culminated in mid-20th-century war-torn Europe. Through Jean-Paul Sartre, we will confront the crushing weight of absolute personal responsibility, and through Albert Camus, we will learn what it means to live with joy and defiance in the face of a completely indifferent universe. Together, we will ask the ultimate existential question: If meaning is not given to us, how do we create it for ourselves?

Course Objectives

By the conclusion of this semester, students will be able to:

- Map the Intellectual Lineage: Trace the evolution of existential thought chronologically, identifying how 20th-century French existentialism directly inherited, adapted, or rejected the ideas of 19th-century Russian literature and German/Danish philosophy.
- Contrast Theistic and Atheistic Existentialism: Articulate the fundamental differences between thinkers who look to a transcendent power to resolve human anxiety (Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky) and those who demand radical self-reliance within a secular reality (Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus).
- Analyze Key Concept Frameworks: Define, compare, and critique core existential concepts including the Absurd, Bad Faith, Angst/Anxiety, the Overman (Übermensch), and the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical.
- Bridge Literature and Philosophy: Evaluate how complex philosophical

dilemmas are dramatized, tested, and lived out through literary narratives, plays, and fictional characters (e.g., Raskolnikov, Meursault, Garcin).

- Formulate Personal Agency: Apply existential frameworks to contemporary issues of choice, ethical responsibility, and identity, developing a critical vocabulary for discussing the human search for meaning in the modern world.

This syllabus anchors a comprehensive course bridging 19th-century Russian psychological realism with 20th-century French existentialism and absurdism. It tracks a core progression: the shattering of traditional moral frameworks, the subsequent burden of total human freedom, and the struggle to find meaning in a silent universe.

Course Syllabus: Freedom, Guilt, and the Absurd

Course Overview

This course examines the human condition through three towering literary and philosophical figures. We will explore how Fyodor Dostoevsky anticipated the existential crisis of modern life, how Jean-Paul Sartre codified radical freedom and responsibility, and how Albert Camus navigated the "Absurd"—the friction between our desire for meaning and a cold, indifferent world.

Required Texts

- Dostoevsky: Notes from Underground, Crime and Punishment, and "The Grand Inquisitor" (from The Brothers Karamazov).
- Sartre: Existentialism is a Humanism (essay) and No Exit (play).

- Camus: The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus (essay).

Chronological Core Modules

Module 1: The Underground and the Death of Certainty

Weeks 1–3

Core Text: Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground

- Focus: The Underground Man's rebellion against rationalism, logic, and self-interest.
- Themes: Hyper-consciousness, free will as a destructive force, and the psychological refusal to be a "piano key" played by nature.

Module 2: The Burden of Freedom and Transgression

Weeks 4–7
Core Texts: Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment and "The Grand Inquisitor"

- Focus: Raskolnikov's attempt to cross moral boundaries, and Christ's silent rejection of the Inquisitor's offer of security over freedom.
- Themes: The psychological cost of total freedom, guilt, redemption, and the terror of a world where "if God is dead, everything is permitted."

Module 3: Radical Responsibility and Bad Faith
Weeks 8–11
Core Texts: Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism and No Exit

- Focus: codifying the phrase "existence precedes essence." If we are not born with a preset purpose, we must invent ourselves through action.

- Themes: Anguish, mauvaise foi (bad faith —lying to oneself about having choices), and how "hell is other people" because their gaze defines and limits us.

Module 4: Confronting the Absurd
Weeks 12–15
Core Texts: Camus, The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus

- Focus: Meursault’s detached perspective on life and execution, paired with the philosophical realization of the Absurd.
- Themes: The rejection of false hope, the refusal to lie about one's feelings, and imagining Sisyphus happy as he pushes his boulder up the hill forever.

Conceptual Framework: Major Points of Comparison

The course emphasizes cross-textual evaluation. Use this matrix to track how each author approaches identical human crises:

Concept	Dostoevsky's Answer	Sartre's Answer	Camus's Answer
The Source of Meaning	**Found in suffering, humility, and divine love.**	**Created entirely by individual, deliberate actions.**	**Defiantly constructed by living passionately despite the void.**
The Threat to Freedom	**Scientific determinism and cold, godless rationalism.**	**Bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) and bowing to societal expectations**	**False hope, religion, or illusions that mask the universe's silence.**
The Ultimate Crisis	**Isolation from community and absolute moral vacuum.**	**The crushing anxiety of being entirely responsible**	**The realization that life has no inherent cosmic significance.**

Key Takeaway: While Dostoevsky views total freedom without a moral anchor as a dangerous path to psychological ruin, Sartre views that same radical freedom as an inescapable, noble reality, and Camus treats it as a prompt to live with fierce, lucid defiance.

The course can be enhanced by adding readings from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche Integrating Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche bridges the gap between Dostoevsky's 19th-century psychological fiction and the mid-20th-century French philosophy of Sartre and Camus.
Kierkegaard represents theistic existentialism, arguing that because life is fundamentally uncertain, an individual must make an intense, passionate "leap of faith" into religious commitment. Nietzsche, conversely, champions atheistic existentialism, declaring the "death of God" and challenging humanity to create its own values to avoid sliding into nihilism (the belief that life is entirely meaningless).
Here is a revised, expanded structural layout to place them right between Dostoevsky’s psychological warnings and the French responses.

Revised Course Structure

Phase 1: The Psychological Prelude
Dostoevsky
Keep Notes from Underground and Crime and Punishment. This establishes the fundamental crisis: what happens to the human psyche when traditional moral frameworks start fracturing under the weight of modern rationality?

Phase 2: The Religious Leap
Kierkegaard
Core Text: Fear and Trembling (specifically the problem of Abraham and Isaac).

- The Bridge: Connects directly to Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor." Where Dostoevsky fears the loss of a moral compass, Kierkegaard argues that true faith actually requires a "teleological suspension of the ethical"—meaning an individual must sometimes stand entirely

alone outside societal morality to face God.

Phase 3: The Secular Rebellion
Nietzsche
Core Texts: Selections from The Gay Science (The Madman parable) and Thus Spoke Zarathustra (The Three Metamorphoses).

- The Bridge: Directly answers Dostoevsky's fear that "everything is permitted." Nietzsche agrees that the old foundation is gone ("God is dead"), but instead of despairing, he challenges humanity to become the Übermensch(Overman)—someone who possesses the strength to forge their own values.

Phase 4: The Existential Codification
Sartre & Camus
Now, when students read Sartre's No Exit or Camus's The Myth of Sisyphus, they will immediately recognize the DNA. Sartre's

"radical responsibility" is the direct inheritance of Nietzsche's self-creation, and Camus's "Absurd" directly echoes Kierkegaard's anxiety of a silent universe—though Camus rejects Kierkegaard's religious leap as a philosophical escape.

Expanded Conceptual Matrix

Adding these two thinkers expands our core points of comparison, mapping out the clear lineage of existential thought:

Thinker	Core Stance on the Void	The Ultimate Goal of the Individual
Dostoevsky	**Terror of a world without a divine moral anchor.**	**Humble submission, community, and redemption through**
Kierkegaard	**Deep anxiety (*Angst*) when facing an infinite God.**	**Embracing paradox and making a passionate, blind "leap of faith."**

Nietzsche	**A liberating but highly dangerous clean slate.**	**Overcoming herd-mentality to actively invent your own values (*Amor Fati*).**
Sartre	**We are "condemned to be free" with no excuses.**	**Accepting absolute responsibility and acting with authentic**
Camus	**A permanent, unresolvable friction.**	**Refusing to escape into illusions; living with defiant, lucid**

Pedagogical Tip: When teaching this transition, explicitly contrast Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. They diagnosed the exact same modern illness—the breakdown of objective certainty—but one fled deep into subjective faith, while the other charged forward into absolute self-reliance. This tension is exactly what Sartre and Camus spent their entire lives trying to untangle.